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Something happened to me, now a full half century in the past, that has shaped my ambition for poetry up until the very present. Not to focus too much on myself, it was a discovery shared with others around me, of the multiple hidden sources & the multiple presences of poetry both far & near. I don't remember clearly where—or when—it started, but once it got under my skin—*our* skin, I mean to say—that which we could hope to know as poetry drew in whole worlds we hadn't previously imagined. Nothing was too low—or high—to be considered, but the imagining mind & voice, once the doors of perception were opened or cleansed, were everywhere we looked.

This also tied in to the search to create new forms of writing & thinking & to bring to light experiences & actions heretofore closed to us: a move that began with an earlier avant-garde & that we now repossessed/reclaimed as our own. A result of that—from the beginning, I thought—was an expansion of what we could now recognize as poetry, for which our inherited definitions had proven to be inadequate. In that sense that which was traditional in other parts of the world or buried & outcast in our own came across as new & unforeseen when placed within our own still too narrow framework. For myself, the discoveries, once I opened up to them, proved as rich in possibilities as what we & our predecessors had been creating for our own place & time. That so much of this came from an imagined “outside” or from long outcast & subterranean, often brutally repressed traditions was evident even before we named them as such.

Why did it happen *then*? Why in the 1950s & 1960s when I was first coming into poetry? The old explorers, the avant-gardists from the first

half of the twentieth century who had gotten some of this rolling, had paused or retreated during the war (the second “world war” in the lifetime of some then among us), which in turn had changed everything around us. The early cold war that followed drove things/thoughts underground for some, while for others it brought the reassertion of a more conventional literary/poetic past. (That last was good, by the way, as a prod for actual resistance.) In the underground & at the margins, then, a new resistance was born in which the rigid past was again wiped clean & the new allowed to flourish. (Not the newness of novelty & fashion, as we saw it, but a newness that could change the mind & in so doing change the world—something shared with other arts & ways of thought & mind.) And with that came a kind of permission to remake the order of things & the changes began to come in helter-skelter; & as they did they changed the idea of what poetry was or could be in all times & places. For myself—early along—I turned to “reinterpreting the poetic past from the point of view of the present”—words I used in a manifesto I wrote in those heady times when so many of us were writing manifestos.

With this as my impulse I began to scour areas that had been closed to us as poetry—hidden, outsided & subterranean—to discover what was clearly poetry but also forms of languaging that had never been within poetry’s domain. The first area I approached was what had for too long been labeled as “primitive” & “archaic” & that surfaced, when it did, (the “primitive” in particular) in specialized books that took up space in libraries & bookstores (but also in academic curricula) outside of poetry or literature as such. My own discoveries, once they started, came in lightning-quick succession, & as they did, they brought to light works in no sense inferior to what we sought or created as poetry in our own time & finally in no sense inferior to what had been delivered as the poetry & poetics of the normative “canonical” past. Furthermore they provided rich new contexts for poetry—not as literature per se but as a means, both public & private, for experiencing & comprehending the world, by which the visions of the individual (along with their translation into language) were at the same time what Mallarmé had called “the words of the tribe” (& Ezra Pound “the tale of the tribe”), words whose purification Mallarmé saw as the poet’s principal task. That the poems in question were largely oral—free of writing in the narrow sense—made them all the more intriguing & played into the draw we felt in our own work toward a new poetics of performance. (That the “tribe” in this sense was the human in all times & places is another point worth making.)

For this I found the anthology a nearly unexplored/undeveloped vehicle, one too in which I was given unchecked control during the heady days of

the late 1960s, so that I could handle it as I would a large assemblage or a grand collage of words & images. That was what came to me anyway as I assembled *Technicians*, the idea of a book that worked through a series of juxtapositions & with a free hand that was given me to include whatever I thought needed including. And I found myself free as well to create a structure for the book & to include an extensive section of commentaries that could both point to the original/aboriginal contexts & to the relevance & resemblance of those poems or *near-poems* (Dick Higgins' term) to contemporary works of poetry & art, but particularly to newly emerging experimental or avant-garde writing.<sup>1</sup> It was that approach to the works at hand that allowed me to find poetry (or what I came to call *poesis* or poetic word & mind) in acts of language that had rarely been recognized as such. I was also able to drop the notion of the "primitive" as a kind of simplistic or undeveloped state of mind & word, & to begin the pre-face to the book with a three-word opening I can still adhere to: "Primitive means complex."<sup>2</sup>

## 2

In the original edition of *Technicians of the Sacred* in 1968, & again in the expanded 1984 edition, the three opening sections end with one titled "Death & Defeat," which I've come to think of as a marker of the tragic if secondary dimension of the original work. The final poem in that section, however, was a small prophetic song from the Plains Indian Ghost Dance":

We shall live again.  
We shall live again.

In the years since then, along with the continued decimation of many poetries & languages, there has been a welcome resurgence, in others, of

1. That the book in turn had some influence on the ways in which poetry was made or understood among my own contemporaries & fellow poets & artists was a welcome if unexpected side effect of what appeared here.

2. After the publication of *Shaking the Pumpkin* (1972) & the second edition of *Technicians of the Sacred* (1985) I was able to continue the project of anthologizing & assemblage with a series of new books, *Poems for the Millennium*, all of which continued to give attention to what the earlier volumes had set in motion. These were, in order of publication, volume 1: *The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry: From Fin-de-Siècle to Negritude*; volume 2: *The University of California Book of Modern & Postmodern Poetry: From Postwar to Millennium*; volume 3: *The University of California Book of Romantic & Postromantic Poetry*; & volume 5: *Barbaric Vast & Wild: A Gathering of Outside & Subterranean Poetry from Origins to Present* (Black Widow Press). The last of these was of course the most obvious continuation of *Technicians of the Sacred*.

what was thought to have been irrevocably lost. This has taken place both in indigenous languages (sometimes called “endangered” or “stateless”) & in the languages of conquest—in written & experimental forms as well as in continuing oral traditions, & as often as not in forms that show both a continuity & transformation of the “deep cultures” from which the new poetry emerges. It is with this in mind that the old Ghost Dance song becomes a harbinger for me of what can now be said & represented.

My own experience here has been largely with the new indigenous poetries of the Americas, both north & south, but in the course of time I have also begun to explore similar outcroppings across a still greater range of continents & cultures. The new indigenous poets with whom I’ve had direct contact in mutual performance & correspondence write & perform in languages such as Nahuatl, Mazatec, Tzotzil, Zapotec, & Mapuche, among those in the Americas, while I can also draw on others (both poets & translators) in Africa, Asia, Europe, & Oceania, to maintain the global balance that characterized the earlier *Technicians*. I have also chosen to represent pidgins & creoles, as well as poetry written in languages like English & Spanish but tied in formal & semantic ways to the deep cultures from which they emerge.

In all of this it seems clear to me that when I speak here of “survivals and revivals” the reference isn’t to a static past but to works that are open both to continuity, however measured, & to necessary transformation. It is good to remember in that sense that change—of form & vision both—has been at the heart of the older poetries gathered here as well as of our own. As Charles Olson wrote, now some time ago: “What does not change is the will to change,” and it is in that spirit that *revival* appears here as *renewal*: to “make it new,” as Ezra Pound once had it, & the Emperor Taizong T’ang some thirteen centuries before him, & so cited (p. 000). In the paradise of poets, to which I’ve alluded elsewhere, the old & the new are always changing places.<sup>3</sup>

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A FINAL NOTE. In the world as we have it today many of the indigenous & tribal/oral cultures foregrounded in *Technicians of the Sacred* are

3. In the present revision too I have been aware of changes since then in the common names of cultures & languages and have acted as far as I could to update them, while allowing some earlier namings to stand beside the new ones where doing so contributed to clarity. I have also attended to recent grammatical changes in gender usage—in my own works where possible though not in those of authors past & present from whose texts I was quoting.

again under threat of disruption & annihilation. If the older colonialisms are less apparent than in the past, new forces unforeseen thirty years ago, both ethnic & religious, are threatening to wipe out vestiges of the alternate traditions & to eliminate those who remain their inheritors. In the process the deeper human past has also come under attack, rekindling memories of previous iconoclasm—the smashing of statues & the burning of books brought into a present in which the fear of difference & of change now reasserts itself. At the same time, & much closer to home, we have witnessed an upsurge of new nationalisms & racisms, directed most often against the diversity of mind & spirit of which the earlier *Technicians* was so clearly a part. To confront this implicit, sometimes rampant ethnic cleansing, even genocide, there is the need for a kind of *omnipoetics* that tests the range of our threatened humanities wherever found & looks toward an ever greater assemblage of words & thoughts as a singular buttress against those forces that would divide & diminish us. That the will to survive arises also among those most directly threatened—as a final & necessary declaration of autonomy *and* interdependence—is yet another fact worth noting.

Jerome Rothenberg  
Encinitas, California  
May Day 2017

## PRE-FACE (1984)

When I first entered on the present work, sometime in the middle 1960s, it was my hope to make a fresh start, to begin at the beginning—as if, in the words of Descartes once quoted by the Dada fathers, “there were no other men before us.” That meant not so much a simple rubbing-out of history as its possible expansion; & it meant, against our inherited notions of the past, a questioning of such notions at their roots. The area I set out to explore was poetry: an idea of poetry—of *language & reality* both—that had haunted me since my own first beginnings as a poet. The inherited view—no longer bearable—was that one such idea of poetry, as developed in the West, was sufficient for the total telling. Against this—as the facts, the poems themselves, revealed—was the realization that poetry, like language itself, existed everywhere: as powerful, even complex, in its presumed beginnings as in many of its later works. In the light of that approach, poetry appeared not as a luxury but as a true necessity: not a small corner of the world for those who lived it but equal to the world itself. (For this the works presented herein would be a confirmation.)

Late into the assembling of *Technicians of the Sacred*, I became aware that the work coincided with a series of openings that were newly reappearing in the culture as a whole. My own sources & predecessors—as far as I knew them then—went back 150, maybe 200 years into the Western past, but the personal awakenings for me & others of my generation came in the decade immediately after the second world war. That much at least was clear to me in the several years I was working on the gathering, but what came as a surprise was that by 1966 or 1967, when I was already into it, the desire for a new beginning had spread in a way that we wouldn’t earlier have believed possible. Several correspondents, later friends, out on the West Coast first got the word to me that there was in

evidence there, as Michael McClure put it, “a *massive* return to ‘instinct and intuition’”: terms that I felt then & now as only a part of the human picture, but a part whose reemergence was long due. The equation I saw—& so stated in the Pre-Face to *Technicians of the Sacred*—was of “imagination” as a process of both “energy” & “intelligence”; or, put another way, that the return of what Blake had called “our antediluvian energies” would lead to a transformation of intelligence rather than its virtual obliteration. It was to this “new imagination” that the work was dedicated—as a resource book of possibilities that were often new for us but that had already been realized somewhere in the world.

All of that entered, as McClure knew it would, into the sixties maelstrom. That meant that the book confronted an audience that was already waiting for it, often with more preconceptions about the “tribal” or the “oral”—& so on—than I myself was willing to take on. But it also coincided with a series of experiments & projects, some highly visible & publicized, others carried on outside the media & the art-world nexus, but all related to what Gary Snyder elsewhere names “the real work.” In the post-script to the book’s original Pre-Face, I wrote: “This post-script is an incitement to those who would join in the enterprise; it is in no sense a final word.” By saying that, I was calling for new work by poets & others, & in the years since, I was able to encourage some of that work & to present it in further anthologies such as *Shaking the Pumpkin*, *A Big Jewish Book*, & *Symposium of the Whole*.<sup>1</sup> Even more so, in 1970 I joined Dennis Tedlock in founding the magazine *Alcheringa*, precisely to carry on the work of *Technicians of the Sacred* in uncovering new & old poetries & developing new means for their translation & presentation. (I later pursued this on my own in *New Wilderness Letter*.) At the same time others were documenting & displaying related works: in specialized books & wide-ranging anthologies, in little & large magazines, in film & video, & in offerings at festivals & conferences on ritual poetry & performance.

The point—again—is that the work was now emerging on its own momentum: a condition of our time that carries over to the present. And similar interests—sometimes in fruitful confrontation with our own—were part of those ethnic movements that have marked an ongoing reorganization of values & powers both in the West & in those multiple cultures of the “third world” undergoing rapid transformations. Our

1. *Symposium of the Whole*, edited with Diane Rothenberg, now exists as a companion to the present volume, tracing the enterprise back two centuries & more, & providing detailed descriptions of matters that can only be hinted at here. I have accordingly attempted, where possible, to cross-reference to it through the pages that follow.

ideas of poetry—including, significantly, our idea of the poet—began to look back *consciously* to the early & late shamans of those other worlds: not as a title to be seized but as a model for the shaping of meanings & intensities through language. As the reflection of our yearning to create a meaningful ritual life—a life lived at the level of poetry—that looking-back related to the emergence of a new poetry & art rooted in performance & in the oldest, most universal of human traditions.

All of that is by now so much a part of the consciousness of late twentieth-century poets & artists that the “news” of the original book is probably no longer news. But the work, by the same token, has hardly begun, & the changed paradigm of where we see ourselves in time & space has received little recognition from the literary brokers. In that sense it remains (like much that is good among us) partly, maybe largely, subterranean.

While *Technicians* has remained the pivotal work for me, I was aware then & now that in first assembling it I had to work within the limits of what was available in the middle 1960s: a tremendous amount of raw material collected by anthropologists & linguists earlier in the century, very few solid or poetically viable translations, & a big gap between the poets & the scholars concerned with this kind of project. Since its publication in 1968, the work on all sides has increased tremendously, part of it, I would like to believe, as a direct or indirect result of what that first gathering had set in motion.

My intention from the start was to be able to return at some point to *Technicians* & to revise it in the light of later work. The strategy for that revision, as I’ve now come to it, has been to keep the structure & approach of the book intact, while adding new material to all the sections & eliminating weaker or more dubious pieces, where that didn’t interfere with the ongoing “arguments” in the commentaries. By the time of *Shaking the Pumpkin*, such new works had clearly begun to appear, & by now (along with older works previously overlooked) they form a constantly expanding source from which to build the present gathering. (That what has opened to us is only a small percentage of the world’s primal poetics is something we would do well to keep in mind.)

The difference from 1968, then, works out largely in favor of the present. As such, it reflects a renewed interest in the collection of traditional poetics & an unprecedented number of translation projects whose main aim has been the re-creation of oral performances in both written & sounded versions. With this has also come a change in quality, a new degree of freedom related to the freedoms won in our own poetry—by which I don’t mean a free & easy approach to the work at hand but

translations & descriptions *freed from* conventional models of poetry & language that allowed us to see only a small part of what was really there. The scholars who have come into it—largely ethnographers & linguists—have developed a closer, more accurate approach to sources, while the poets have shown how translated works can be created that carry the excitement of charged language (poetry) straight over into English. But the two approaches have never been exclusive, & the crossovers between the poets & the scholars (sometimes their active collaboration) have by now blurred what once seemed to be an ironclad distinction.

This revised edition is in some sense a reflection of those fifteen years of renewal & owes more to the new translators than I can ever properly express. On their more technical side, the experiments in translation have involved such scholars as Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes, David McAllester, Allan Burns, & Peter Seitel, while the poets have included Nathaniel Tarn, Armand Schwerner, W.S. Merwin, James Koller, Anselm Hollo, Edward Field, Carol Rubenstein, & Barbara Einzig, among many others. The projects have often been extensive in scope & based on firsthand explorations (“seeing for oneself”—C. Olson): the Cree Indian tellings gathered & closely re-created by Howard Norman (a Cree speaker from childhood); the precise translations of Dennis Tedlock from Zuni & Mayan that developed a new model for transcribing oral performances in writing; the works of A.K. Ramanujan bringing us the visionary poetry of Tamil (*bhakti*) saints & madmen; Kofi Awoonor’s firsthand translations of still contemporary Ewe *heno* poets; Judith Gleason’s unravelings of epic Ifa divination poems; Donald Philippi’s translations of the oldest Japanese writings & the story-poems, from almost the present, of Ainu shamans & singers; David Guss’s recent efforts to bring the Makiritare imaginal world into English; Henry Munn’s translations from the extended shamanistic sessions of María Sabina & other Mazatec healers; my own experiments, circa 1970, with “total translations” from Seneca & Navajo; & the continuing work of David McAllester, R.M. Berndt, Miguel León-Portilla, & Ulli Beier.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the tightness of this or that translation, the versions & workings—still from a variety of approaches—are examples in themselves of that continuation or diffusion of ideas & images that has been—always—a fundamental marker of the human condition.

An assemblage like this one is by its nature an anthology of *versions*.

2. [In the years since I wrote this, other translators & poet-translators have come into the picture, many of them presented in these pages & showing various degrees of experiment & innovation in the process: Stuart Cooke, Richard Dauenhauer, Stephen Goodman, Bob Holman (with Papa Susso), Pierre Joris & Nicole Peyrafitte, David Larsen, Gerry Loose, Stephen Muecke, Erik Mueggler, David Shook, & Wai-lim Yip.]

Among the sources absent from the original *Technicians*, the most conspicuous were those from Europe. Not that I had planned it that way, but I found as I got into it that I was uncertain how to distinguish a non-“literary” tradition in European poetry & was overwhelmed by the task of selection & retranslation. The materials felt too close for me to get a clear image of how they fitted with the others or to separate the European “primitive” from its development by later poets. Beyond that I was aware—& that awareness has continued to the present—of how the old European poetries (the mythologies in particular) had been corrupted to serve the ends of European nationalisms: that Western mythology & folklore in their nineteenth- & early twentieth-century forms were shot through with racist distortions, teutonic fakeries, & so on. The political intention of *Technicians* was in fact to call such European hegemonies into question.

The exclusion of Europe resulted, probably, in the exaggeration of the European difference: not a contrast between “primitive” & “civilized” modes of thought but a European/non-European split that leaves Europe as an entity almost entirely apart. (It also masks the fact that European cultural imperialism began against populations themselves a part of Europe & has continued there up to the present.) In the intervening years I kept going back to Europe & to the necessary sourceworks, devoting the fifth issue of *Alcheringa* to them & first conceiving *A Big Jewish Book* as a roundabout attempt to deal with the European experience through the focus of a Jewish diaspora that merged with multiple European cultures. In the meantime new translations became available from various sources that revealed more clearly than before those instances where mind—& its coming-forth through language—was at its most intense in Europe: where the poetics of the shamans (even where we saw the shamans hunted down as heretics & witches) was still in evidence for all to see & hear.

It now seems clear to me that such a European section—& the interspersing of European materials elsewhere in this book—is not only useful in itself but can have an illuminating effect on the other areas covered. My procedure here is to follow a line that runs from a conjectural tribal/oral past & has been carried forward through a series of subterranean & folk traditions, often magical or mystical in nature. In concrete terms, the work begins with a reconstructed paleolithic calendar count & with some of those Mesopotamian sources (Sumerian, Ugaritic, Hittite) that were geographically Asian but in constant interplay with ancient Europe. From there it moves to early Greek & Roman models that are themselves on the border between an oral & a written poetry, before drawing

(nonchronologically) from a range of sources that include pre-Christian (pagan & shamanistic) mythologies & poetries recovered over the last 200 years from Celtic, Icelandic, Finnish, Anglo-Saxon, Serbian, & so on; works like the Syriac “round dance of Jesus” as an example of a (heretical) gnosticism that reveals a virtual process of open *poesis*; magical texts & soundtexts using—like their counterparts elsewhere—a specialized language of changes & what Malinowski called “the coefficient of weirdness”; & outcroppings of all of these in latterday folk traditions & lores, particularly as they touch the work of romantic & modern poets or affirm a counterpoetics rooted in practices resembling or related to others in these pages. (That even this much of the older work has survived I would take as the sign of a resistance—deeply, even darkly, political—to the conformities demanded by the ruling nation-states.)

Finally, it has been my decision to include a few works from the established (literary) tradition that are connected as well to the old lore insofar as it remained a living presence in the air of Europe. The persistence of such connections explains the appearance here of Rabelais, Saint Francis, Blake, & even Shakespeare—as, less surprisingly, that of Homer & Hesiod—along with my sense that the equals of the old “technicians of the sacred” aren’t only to be found at the margins but at the center of our poetries as generally understood. (It is at this point that the distinction between the margins & the center begins to drop away.) That such ways-of-mind may be more intact in the oral/written work of a Shakespeare than in the more dispersed/fragmented work (however marvelous) of this or that “folk” poet is not a retreat from the proposals of *Technicians of the Sacred* but the strongest affirmation I can give them. The attempt to show this greater “great tradition” is—like much else in this book—only a beginning, & its expansion would take me into a work like what George Quasha & I attempted in *America a Prophecy*: a merging of the literary & the nonliterary toward the presentation of a visionary poetics in *all* its phases.

The intention of the book—its presentation of the world’s “tribal & oral poetries” / of “savage mind” wherever found—is otherwise explained in the original Pre-Face. I have reprinted it here with only some minor modifications, but the event has also opened me to a review of many of the propositions—my own & others’—that remain largely unresolved. It is late in the game by now, but it seems to me (given whatever experience I’ve had with it) that we’re still overwhelmed by preconceptions as we go on with the work at hand. I have tried, myself, to deal with certain of these which I find questionable or disproven by the actual investigation.

And again & again I find that part of my work the hardest to get across.  
A few explicit warnings, therefore:

—that we must, above all, avoid clichés about the poetics/ethnopoetics of technologically *simpler* cultures—which led me to begin *Technicians* with an emphasis on the *complexity* of tribal/oral language & (ritual) art;

—that we must question—by investigation—the idea that traditional art & poetry are collective rather than individual—reflective in fact, as Paul Radin wrote, of “an individualism run riot”;

—that we must not assume that it is our culture alone (or those cultures most like our own) that has introduced reflexivity/self-reflection into the creative process, when scholars like Victor Turner have taken such pains to demonstrate the reflexive nature of ritual & art throughout the full range of human cultures;

—that we can no longer assume that the poetry & ritual of traditional cultures aims at stasis rather than at change/transformation not only in a mystical sense but in a social sense as well—for, in Olson’s paraphrasing of Heraclitus: “what does not change / is the will to change”;

& we must be careful not to assume

—that orality totally defines “them” or that writing totally defines “us” (a major attempt of this revision is to explore—even more than in 1968—the universality of writing/drawing as a primal form of language);

nor should we overlook

—that people have thought long & hard—everywhere—about language & its accomplishment through performance;

—that a poetics—a generalized “idea of poetry”—has arisen again & again in the total human story, no more nor less “universal” than the Athenian poetics which gave a start to one such line of thinking in the West;

—that much of what we think of (too easily) as primitive or traditional is the work of our contemporaries & a response—as in many of the poems gathered herein—to a world that they & we share;<sup>3</sup>

3. [The Survivals & Revivals section of the present—third—edition of this book is a still further indication of how many of the poets presented here are our contemporaries & companions in an increasingly threatened & interdependent world.]

& we must remember to our own good

—that a poetry of the spirit—a visionary poetry—is not only to be found apart from us; that while it pervades many old cultures, it has, since the nineteenth century at least, been a prominent mode among our own poets (& in some sense has likely always been that, as a kind of crypto [hidden] vision).

And knowing that, we have the advantage of observing in the traditional cultures how such modes have permeated whole populations & how they've been carried forward over millennia.

By doing all this, we can also discover forms that we've barely dreamed of, or we can ignore them to our loss & hardly (as far as I can see) to *their* advantage. One result will be that our poetry will cease to be “modern” (as Tristan Tzara, a major forerunner of the present work, long ago predicted) & will emerge, with the dissolution of modernism, as what it was all along: “a state of mind (*esprit*)” . . . not an investment in a “new technique” but “in the spirit.”

Jerome Rothenberg  
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February 10, 1984

## PRE-FACE (1967)

### *Primitive Means Complex*

That there are no primitive languages is an axiom of contemporary linguistics where it turns its attention to the remote languages of the world. There are no half-formed languages, no underdeveloped or inferior languages. Everywhere a development has taken place into structures of great complexity. People who have failed to achieve the wheel will not have failed to invent & develop a highly wrought grammar. Hunters & gatherers innocent of all agriculture will have vocabularies that distinguish the things of their world down to the finest details. The language of snow among the Eskimos is awesome. The aspect system of Hopi verbs can, by a flick of the tongue, make the most subtle kinds of distinction between different types of motion.

What is true of language in general is equally true of poetry & of the ritual-systems of which so much poetry is a part. It is a question of energy & intelligence as universal constants &, in any specific case, the direction that energy & intelligence (= imagination) have been given. No people today is newly born. No people has sat in sloth for the thousands of years of its history. Measure everything by the Titan rocket & the transistor radio, & the world is full of primitive peoples. But once change the unit of value to the poem or the dance-event or the dream (all clearly artificial situations) & it becomes apparent what all those people have been doing all those years with all that time on their hands.

Poetry, wherever you find it among the “primitives” (literally *everywhere*), involves an extremely complicated sense of materials & structures.<sup>1</sup>

1. The word “primitive” is used with misgivings & put in quotes, but no way around it seems workable. “Non-technological” & “non-literate,” which have often been suggested as alternatives, are too emphatic in pointing to supposed “lacks” &.

Everywhere it involves the manipulation (fine or gross) of multiple elements. If this isn't always apparent, it's because the carry-over (by translation or interpretation) necessarily distorts where it chooses some part of the whole that it can meaningfully deal with. The work is foreign & its complexity is often elusive, a question of gestalt or configuration, of the angle from which the work is seen. If you expect a primitive work to be simple or naïve, you will probably end up seeing a simple or naïve work; & this will be abetted by the fact that translation can, in general, only present as a single work, a part of what is actually there. The problem is fundamental for as long as we approach these works from the outside—& we're likely fated to be doing that forever.

It's very hard in fact to decide what precisely are the boundaries of "primitive" poetry or of a "primitive" poem, since there's often no activity differentiated as such, but the words or vocables are part of a larger total "work" that may go on for hours, even days, at a stretch. What we would separate as music & dance & myth & painting is also part of that work, & the need for separation is a question of "our" interest & preconceptions, not of "theirs." Thus the picture is immediately complicated by the nature of the work & the media that comprise it. And it becomes clear that the "collective" nature of primitive poetry (upon which so much stress has been placed despite the existence of individualized poems & clearly identified poets) is to a great degree inseparable from the amount of materials a single work may handle.

Now all of this is, if so stated, a question of technology as well as inspiration; & we may as well take it as axiomatic for what follows that where poetry is concerned, "primitive" means complex.

### *What is a "Primitive" Poem?*

Poems are carried by the voice & are sung or chanted or spoken in specific situations. Under such circumstances, runs the easy answer, the "poem" would simply be the words-of-the-song. But a little later on the

though they feel precise to start with, are themselves open to question. Are the Inuit [Eskimo] snow-workers, e.g., really "non"- or "pre-technological"? And how does the widespread use of pictographs & pictosymbols, which can be "read" by later generations, affect their users' non-literate status? A major point throughout this book is that these peoples (& they're likely too diverse to be covered by a single name) are precisely "technicians" where it most concerns them—specifically in their relation to the "sacred" as something they can actively create or capture. That's the only way in fact that I'd hope to define "primitive": as a situation in which such conditions flourish & in which the "poets" are (in a variant of Mircea Eliade's phrase) the principle "technicians of the sacred."

question arises: what *are* the words & where do they begin & end? The translation, as printed, may show the “meaningful” element only, often no more than a single, isolated “line”; thus

*A splinter of stone which is white* (Saan [Bushman])

*Semen white like the mist* (Australian)

*My-shining-horns* (Ojibwa: single word)

etc.

but in practice the one “line” will likely be repeated until its burden has been exhausted. (Is it “single” then?) It may be altered phonetically & the words distorted from their “normal” forms. Vocables with no fixed meanings may be intercalated. All of these devices will be creating a greater & greater gap between the “meaningful” residue in the translation & what-was-actually-there. We will have a different “poem” depending where we catch the movement, & we may start to ask: Is something within this work the “poem,” or is everything?

Again, the work will probably not end with the “single” line & its various configurations—will more likely be preceded & followed by other lines. Are all of these “lines” (each of considerable duration) separate poems, or are they the component parts of a single, larger poem moving toward some specific (ceremonial) end? Is it enough, then, if the lines happen in succession & aren’t otherwise tied? Will some further connection be needed? Is the group of lines a poem if “we” can make the connection? Is it a poem where no connection is apparent to “us”? If the lines come in sequence on a single occasion does the unity of the occasion connect them into a single poem? Can many poems be a single poem as well? (They often are.)

What’s a sequence anyway?

What’s unity?

### *The Unity of “Primitive” Thought & its Shattering*

The anthology shows some ways in which the unity is achieved—in general by the imposition of some constant or “key” against which all disparate materials can be measured. A sound, a rhythm, a name, an image, a dream, a gesture, a picture, an action, a silence: any or all of these can function as “keys.” Beyond that there’s no need for consistency, for fixed or discrete meanings. An object is whatever it becomes under the impulse of the situation at hand. Forms are often open. Causality is often set aside. The poets (who may also be dancers, singers, magicians, whatever

the event demands of them) master a series of techniques that can fuse the most seemingly contradictory propositions.

But above all there's a sense-of-unity that surrounds the poem, a reality concept that acts as a cement, a unification of perspective linking

poet & man  
man & world  
world & image  
image & word  
word & music  
music & dance  
dance & dancer  
dancer & man  
man & world  
etc.

all of which has been put in many different ways—by Cassirer notably as a feeling for “the solidarity of all life” leading toward a “law of metamorphosis” in thought & word.

Within this undifferentiated & unified frame with its open images & mixed media, there are rarely “poems” as we know them—but we come in with our analytical minds & shatter the unity. It has in fact been shattered already by workers before us.

### *Primitive & Modern: Intersections & Analogies*

Like any collector, my approach to delimiting & recognizing what's a poem has been by analogy: in this case (beyond the obvious definition of poems as words-of-songs) to the work of modern poets. Since much of this work has been revolutionary & limit-smashing, the analogy in turn expands the range of what “we” can see as “primitive” poetry. It also shows some of the ways in which “primitive” poetry & thought are close to an impulse toward unity in our own time, of which the poets are forerunners. The important intersections (analogies) are:

- |                                    |                       |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (1) the poem carried by the voice: | written poem as score |
| a “pre”-literate situation of      | public readings       |
| poetry composed to be spoken,      | performance poetry    |
| chanted or, more accurately,       | poets' theaters       |
| sung; compare this to the          | jazz poetry           |
| “post-literate” situation, in      | rock poetry etc.      |

- McLuhan's good phrase, or where-we-are-today;
- (2) a highly developed process of image-thinking; concrete or non-causal thought in contrast to the simplifications of Aristotelian logic, etc., with its "objective categories" & rules of non-contradiction; a "logic" of polarities; creation thru dream, etc.; modern poetry (having had & outlived the experience of rationalism) enters a post-logical phase;
  - (3) a "minimal" art of maximal involvement; compound elements, each clearly articulated, & with plenty of room for fill-in (gaps in sequence, etc.): the "spectator" as (ritual) participant who pulls it all together;
  - (4) an "intermedia" situation, as further denial of the categories: the poet's techniques aren't limited to verbal maneuvers but operate also through song, non-verbal sound, visual signs, & the varied activities of the ritual event: here the "poem" = the work of the "poet" in whatever medium, or (where we're able to grasp it) the totality of the work;
  - (5) the animal-body-rootedness of "primitive" poetry: recognition of a "physical" basis for the poem within a man's body—or as an act of body & mind together, breath &/or spirit; in

Blake's multi-images  
 symbolisme  
 surrealism  
 deep-image  
 random poetry  
 composition by field etc.  
 concrete poetry  
 picture poems  
 prose poems  
 happenings  
 total theater  
 poets as film & video makers  
 poésie sonore  
 dada  
 lautgedichte (sound poems)  
 beast language  
 line & breath  
 projective verse etc.  
 sexual revolution etc.  
 Rimbaud's voyant  
 Rilke's angel  
 Lorca's duende  
 beat poetry  
 psychedelic see-in's, be-in's,  
 etc.  
 individual neo-shamanisms,  
 etc., works directly influenced  
 by the "other" poetry or by  
 analogies to "primitive art":  
 ideas of negritude, tribalism,  
 wilderness, etc.

many cases too the direct & open handling of sexual imagery & (in the “events”) of sexual activities as key factors in creation of the sacred;

(6) the poet as shaman, or primitive shaman as poet & seer thru control of the means just stated: an open “visionary” situation prior to all system-making (“priesthood”) in which the poet/shaman creates thru dream (image) & word (song), “that Reason may have ideas to build on” (W. Blake).

What’s more, the translations themselves may create new forms & shapes-of-poems with their own energies & interest—another intersection that can’t be overlooked.<sup>2</sup>

In all this the ties feel very close—not that “we” & “they” are identical, but that the systems of thought & the poetry they’ve achieved are, like what we’re after, distinct from something in the official “west,” & we can now see & value them because of it. What’s missing are the in-context factors that define them more closely group-by-group: the sense of the poems as part of an integrated social & religious complex; the presence in each instance of specific myths & locales; the fullness of the living culture. Here the going is rougher with no easy shortcuts through translation: no simple carry-overs. If our world is open to multiple influences & data, theirs seems largely self-contained. If we’re committed to a search for the “new,” most of them are tradition-bound. (The degree to which “they” are can be greatly exaggerated.) If the poet’s purpose among us is “to spread doubt [& create illusion]” (N. Calas), among them it’s to overcome it.

That they’ve done so *without denying the reality* is also worth remembering.

2. [Most of what I’ve listed here as modern or contemporary modes, circa 1967, have persisted into the present century or taken new forms, some of them still on the outside—“at the margins”—but many now more widely recognized & practiced. In this regard it may be worth noting that the intervening years have brought new technologies into our larger avant-garde practice, to which we should also be receptive. (J.R.)]

## *The Background & Structure of this Book*

The present collection grew directly out of a pair of 1964 readings of “primitive & archaic poetry”<sup>3</sup> at the Poet’s Hardware Theater & the Cafe Metro in New York. Working with me on those were the poets David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, & Rochelle Owens. The material, which I’d been assembling or translating over the previous several years, was arranged topically rather than geographically—an order preserved here in the first three sections of texts. The idea for a “book of events” came from a discussion with Dick Higgins about what he was calling “near-poetry” & from my own sense of the closeness of primitive rituals (when stripped-down to the bare line of the activities) to the “happenings” & “events” he was presenting as publisher of Something Else Press. The last four [now five] sections roughly correspond to some kind of geographical reality—not that there aren’t problems of overlap, etc., in a grouping by continents but simply that it provides an alternate way of bringing the materials together. (The reader may think of some others as well.)

While the final gathering is several times its 1964 size, I don’t see it in any sense as more than a beginning. My intention from the start was to find translations that would “translate,” i.e., bring-the-work-across or be a living work in English, & that’s a very different thing from (in the first place) looking for representative “masterpieces” & including them whatever the nature of the translations. I also have (no question about it) my own sense of what’s worth it in poetry, & I’ve tried to work from that rather than against it. I haven’t gone for “pretty” or “innocent” or “noble” poems so much as strong ones. Throughout I’ve kept the possibilities wide open: looking for new forms & media; hoping that what I finally assembled could be read as “contemporary,” since so much of it is that in fact, still being created & used in a world we share. Where there was a choice of showing poems separately or in series (as described above), I’ve leaned toward the in-series presentation. Since I feel that the complexity & tough-mindedness of primitive poetry have never really

3. Throughout the book I use “archaic” [or “traditional” as its virtual, less loaded synonym] to mean (1) the early phases of the so-called “higher” civilizations, where poetry & voice still hadn’t separated or where the new writing was used for setting down what the voice had already made; (2) contemporary “remnant” cultures in which acculturation has significantly disrupted the “primitive modes”; & (3) a cover-all term for “primitive,” “early high,” & “remnant.” The word is useful because of the generalization it permits (the variety of cultures is actually immense) & because it encompasses certain “mixed” cultural situations. My interest is in whether the poetry works, not in the “purity” of the culture from which it comes. I doubt, in fact, if there can be “pure” cultures.

been shown (& since I happen to like such qualities in poems), I've decided to stress them. I've kept in general within the domain of the book's title, though sometimes I did include poems for no other reason than that they sounded good to me or moved me.

The poems are first given without any comments or footnotes, & the readers who like it like that don't have to go any further. (*They* won't, no matter what I say.) Taking poems straight in that sense is like the Australian aborigines who (wrote W.E. Roth) would borrow whole poems verbatim "in a language absolutely remote from [their] own, & not one word of which the audience or performers can understand the meaning of": an extreme case of out-of-context reading but (where the culture's alive to its own needs) completely legitimate. Even so I've provided a section of "commentaries," which try in each instance to fill in the scene or to indicate a little of what the original poets would have expected their hearers to know—in other words, to sketch some of the elements for an in-context reading. These "commentaries," which the reader can approach from any direction he or she chooses, also show what the poems mean to me or to other poets in this century who have approached them out-of-context. In that sense they can be read (particularly those for the first three sections) as a running series of essays dealing with the questions about primitive poetry lightly touched-on in this introduction, or even as an approach to poetry in general. Where it seemed worthwhile I've also printed contemporary American & European poems as analogues to the "primitive" work, sometimes without further comment. As with modern & primitive art, these either show the direct influence of the other poetry or, much more frequently, a coincidence of forms arising from an analogous impulse.

I've tried to make the book usable for anyone who wants it. Likely there are places where I've explained too much (here the reader whose special knowledge exceeds my own will simply have to forgive me), & I've sometimes included materials more from the point of descriptive interest (i.e., for the story) than of "scientific" accuracy. For the reader who wants to follow up on what's given here, I've been as straightforward as possible about the sources, providing a running bibliography & cross-referencing where I could. Translations range from the very literal to the very free (there's no one method that insures a decent result in English), & the commentaries often point out how far (or not) the translator has gone. But the limits of any translation, in terms of the "information" it carries, are also obvious. Such "information" concerns the language itself as a medium, & the language of the translator can hardly be a guide, since it should (where he's giving a poem for a poem) also be

working from its own imperatives. Enough to say that the original poetries presented here range from those that lean heavily on an archaic or specialized vocabulary & syntax to those that turn the common language toward the purposes of song—& that the same is true of the verse, which includes everything from the very open to the very closed.

Finally, an appendix to the book presents a series of statements about poetics from a number of poets & song-men, & other such statements are scattered throughout the commentaries. I've hoped by doing this to get across the sense of these poets as individualized & functioning human beings. To this end also I've tried where possible to name the original poets—either those who delivered the poems or the ancient figures to whom the poems were attributed.

Beyond that, it's up to the individual readers who may, like their “primitive” counterparts, enjoy finishing the work on-their-own, i.e., by filling in what's missing.

#### *Thanks & Acknowledgments, etc.*

The problem is to remember all who were helpful, & even so there's not enough space to state the ways they were. Here are the names, anyway, with thanks & in the hope they'll understand: Jerry Bloedow, David Antin, Jackson Mac Low, Rochelle Owens, Harry Smith, James Laughlin, Sara Blackburn, Anne Freedgood, Dick Higgins, Emmett Williams, Gary Snyder, Jonathan Greene, David Wang, Stanley Diamond, Flicker Hammond, Michael McClure, Marcia Goodman, Martha Rossler, David P. McAllester, & various friends at the Coldspring Longhouse (Steamburg, NY) who showed me what the sacred was.

Behind the book also are a woman & a child, & I'm reminded again how central the-woman & the-child are to the “oldest” cultures that we know. The dedication of this book is therefore rightly theirs—in whose presence I've sometimes touched that oldest & darkest love.

Jerome Rothenberg  
New York City  
March 15, 1967

#### *Post-Script to Pre-Face*

Once having gotten here the question was WHERE NOW? I've been lucky since then to have been able to work with some of the materials at closer range, moving toward a collaboration with song-men & others who could open the languages to me—& the closer one gets the more

pressing becomes the problem of how to understand & to translate the *sound* of the originals. It now seems possible to do it, to get at those “meanings” which are more than the meaning-of-the-words; possible & desirable too, for the greatest secret these poems still hold is in the actual relation between the words, the music, the dance, & the event, a relation which many among us have been trying to get at in our own work. Every new translation is the uncovering of a hidden form in the language of the translator, but at the same time the rediscovery of universal patterns that can be realized by anyone still willing to explore them. In some future edition I hope to include the results of experimental work (by myself & others) in the *total translation* of these poetries. Because we have so much already, it is at last possible to have it all. *This post-script is an incitement to those who would join in the enterprise; it is in no sense a final word.*

J. R.  
Allegany Reservation (Seneca)  
Steamburg, NY  
September 1, 1968